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## **Spectatorship, Performance, Resistance: Carlos Marcovich's *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?***

*¿Quién diablos es Juliette?*<sup>i</sup> (*Who the Hell is Juliette?*) is the directorial debut of Carlos Marcovich, a Mexican who had previously worked as a cinematographer on film and music video. A highly experimental, original film, *¿Quién diablos?* won the Latin America Cinema Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998. This playful 'mockumentary' -- part documentary about the life of Cuban teenager Yuliet Ortega, part self-conscious fictionalizing -- gives us a powerful insight into issues of female spectatorship in a globalized culture of visibility in which 'woman' and 'image', sexuality, power and the gaze, are hard to separate. In this article I show how *¿Quién diablos?* narrativizes the female spectator's pleasures in homosexual structures of looking as part of its broader self-reflexive preoccupation with the visual. I address issues of resistance and complicity both within the arena of the gaze and within the film's self-conscious dwelling on aspects of performance in post-colonial cultural spaces. The film is centred on a post-colonial, feminine subject, who is inscribed in an ambiguous matrix of submission and resistance, but Marcovich also explores structures of domination in the apparatus and institution of cinema itself, such as the spectator--star relationship and the domination and marginalization of other cinemas by Hollywood. The film offers possible (though always problematic) paths of resistance to the complex and ambiguous power relations in *¿Quién diablos?*.

On location in Cuba with Mexican model Fabiola Quiróz, shooting a music video for singer Benny Ibarra, Marcovich and his entourage meet Cuban teenager Yuliet Ortega whom they ask to star in the video alongside Fabiola. In 1995, at the height of Cuba's

‘Special Period’, director Marcovich returns to Cuba to make a documentary about the life of Yuliet, based around ‘interviews’ (often obviously staged, scripted and self-conscious) with her, with members of her family, with residents of San Miguel del Padrón, the Havana *barrio* where she lives, as well as with Fabiola, Benny, and a host of others. The presentation of Yuliet is complex: although she continually exceeds the frame of masculine sexuality, particularly in the visual sense (she turns the camera around etc.), she has been raped in early adolescence and is now part of Havana’s culture of sex tourism, taking money and gifts from holidaying Italian men in return for sex. The film cites the well-worn narratives of the rags-to-riches tale and its close relative, the identity quest (the title’s question is never satisfactorily answered; it is also an irreverent challenge to those who would Europeanize her name, of which more later), and reunion with a long-lost father. Indeed, in a move which is typical of the film’s self-conscious manufacturing of fiction, Yuliet presents her story in the third person, using the clichés of these genres: ‘This is the story of a little girl who went to the city and met some foreigners’,<sup>ii</sup> whilst relatives testify to her intelligence and pluckiness in spite of her disadvantaged background, seeming to prompt what later becomes a massive directorial intervention<sup>iii</sup> in the form of an offered ‘way out’ – she is bought a ticket to Mexico, offered a modelling contract and reunited with her father, whose absence has been a constant theme throughout the film. As Santiago Herrera puts it, the film ‘documents the effects of its own making’<sup>iv</sup> – Marcovich does not deny the effects of filming on his characters, and highlights the apparatus of filmmaking. This action ranges from the smallest details of the *mise-en-scène* to the large interventions which change the course of the narrative, emphasizing the effect the act of observing has on that which is under observation.

Indeed, Marcovich almost seems to be sending up the post-modern stylization of recent docu-fiction, employing an excessive compendium of devices in this irreverent film which revels in its own fictive status, and at once revolves around the notions of ‘real/authentic’ versus ‘fictional/inauthentic’ whilst fundamentally negating this opposition. Characters ‘play’ themselves, at times speaking naturally enough, at times obviously performing scripted lines, sometimes over and over again in an ‘attempt’ to deliver them in a particular way. The film is as much about the process of making a film as anything else, and so gleefully displays those glitches and imperfections which illusionistic cinema would be at pains to disguise. For example, only during the making of the film does the director find out the correct spelling of the protagonist’s name, and the letters of ‘Juliette’ are wiped out and re-stamped across the screen as ‘Y-U-L-I-E-T’, whilst the names of the many various production companies involved in the making of the film, instead of appearing discreetly in a list of credits, are boldly stamped on the screen one by one, in the form of visa stamps, pointing to the film’s making not as something smooth and seamless, but as a journey, with its obstacles and frustrations.

*¿Quién diablos?* discourages any spectatorial equation between visibility and truth – an important message in societies increasingly governed by the logic of the spectacle, and in which televisual media often purports to be objective. The following lines from a Guicho Cisneros song ‘Gema’ (‘Jewel’) are repeatedly sung by Fabiola, her mother and as part of the extra-diegetic music: ‘If my eyes do not deceive me, if my eyes do not lie, your beauty is without equal’, highlighting the gendering of spectacle, but also questioning the relationship between vision and truth/deception. There is a frequent slippage in *¿Quién diablos?* between the visual image and the sound track, and contradictions are highlighted between characters’ words and the image, or between

one image and the next. The image frequently does ‘deceive’ us before going on to highlight the deception. The film is full of visual-linguistic jokes around the slipperiness of signifiers: Yuliet is presented with a *papa* (potato) in place of her father; Fabiola asks for Marcos (her father) and is shown into a shop selling picture frames (*marcos*). Framing, and the exclusions it necessitates, is repeatedly emphasized, implying that the framing of the screen image always inevitably excludes elements which could subvert it: that for any given narrative to exist it is necessary to exclude that which exceeds it. It is important, however, to remember that any earnest spectatorial quest for a logical or coherent meaning is discouraged by one of Yuliet’s first lines: ‘a tremendous farce we’re serving up here’, and her reference to the film as ‘the director’s joke, not mine’. The film is simply irreducible to any one, unified meaning, and just when the spectator is duped into believing there is one, a character will mock us from the screen with a knowing wink or grin.

### **Female Spectatorship in *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?***

Since Laura Mulvey's essay on visual pleasure and narrative cinema in 1975, and her later characterization of the female spectator's 'phantasy of masculinization' as 'restless in its transvestite clothes',<sup>v</sup> feminist film theorists have focussed on the vicissitudes of female spectatorship, and have differed particularly over the question of whether the female spectator's gaze is masculinized, as Mulvey argued, or, as Bellour suggests, masochistic in its identification with the traditional female character in Hollywood film whose gaze is so often denied. The related issue of the female spectator's relationship to female characters or film stars has also motivated theorists. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it, the female viewer is 'doubly bound to that very representation which calls on her directly, engages her desire, elicits her pleasure, frames her identification, and makes her complicit in the production of (her) woman-ness',<sup>vi</sup> suggesting that for the female spectator, desire and identification may not be mutually exclusive, as Freud would have it. Jackie Stacey has argued against the use of binary conceptions of sexuality (either a 'masculine' viewing position or a 'feminine' one) when theorizing female spectatorship.<sup>vii</sup>

Consideration of these and related issues, such as the cinematic processes which invite identification, is essential to an analysis of *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?*, a film that narrativizes the dynamics of female spectatorship through the diegetic staging of mechanisms of identification and desire between women, and which explores cinematic and other processes by which female stars are created and which encourage certain spectatorial responses. If 'femininity in modernity has become very much a question of hypervisibility',<sup>viii</sup> then *¿Quién diablos?* is an exploration of a global visual culture in

which woman is image, and a self-reflexive examination of the gaze/the camera which makes this possible. It explores thematically and cinematically issues of sexuality, power and looking, whilst also being strongly performative with respect to these issues.

The important theme of looking, and the visual, is announced at the outset of the film by the music we hear in the background while Yuliet speaks. The song is Frankie Ruiz's 'Mirándote' ('Looking at you') and whilst we only hear a snatch of it, the title word stands out, emphasizing not only the importance of the gaze, but that of its object. The motif of the eye -- which appears in songs, conversation, pictures -- further emphasizes the structures of looking within the film. Physical appearance is also emphasized by the anxious discourse around beauty, with labels of 'pretty' or 'ugly' being concentrated in the first few minutes of the film. The film is structured around the central character of Yuliet, and her relationship with Fabiola. However, for the purposes of this section I will focus on the relationships of parallels (or mirroring, if you like) between these two important characters and a third, minor character. This is film star Salma Hayek, who makes a guest appearance in the film as herself, and also in a clip from the 1995 film for which Marcovich was cinematographer, *El callejón de los milagros*<sup>ix</sup> (*Midaq Alley*) where she plays the role of Almita. The relationships between these three (or four) women are central to the creation of meaning in *¿Quién diablos?*.

All three women are players in femininity's 'hypervisibility'. Hayek is a Hollywood actress, originally from Mexico, Fabiola a Mexican fashion model, and Yuliet the unlikely star of a documentary (*¿Quién diablos?*), having previously appeared in a music video, and with aspirations to become a model. In the film's staging of the female spectator's identifications, pleasures and desires, Yuliet comes to represent the



female spectator as she negotiates her relationship to two female stars in the televisual media: Fabiola and Hayek. As the film's protagonist, and thus the natural object of the spectator's identification, Yuliet herself must shift position between looker and looked-at throughout the course of the film.

Yuliet meets Fabiola and the latter's colleague Benny (a musician) when she leaves her neighbourhood for downtown Havana -- an intermediate space between the hardship of Yuliet's life and the jet-setting life-style of the Mexicans who are there to shoot a music video. Although Fabiola is not a film star, we are shown a series of her modelling shots and her fame is alluded to. Yuliet is asked to star in the video, 'because she looks like Fabiola'. This sequence, which includes several extended clips of the music video itself is the beginning of what will be the manufacturing of a dynamic of similarity/difference between the two women, and part of the film's self-conscious construction of fiction. We are informed that they resemble one another physically, but always that Yuliet resembles Fabiola, not vice versa. Fabiola is the star-standard or ideal of femininity which Yuliet must approximate or obtain. The music video constructs a resemblance by accentuating similarities such as the cut and colour of their hair, inviting us to compare them, and inevitably to find similarities and differences which feed into this dynamic. Psychological similarities are also indicated -- the most striking being the absence of their fathers -- and the related search for identity in which each woman is engaged. *Difference*, that of nationality (Mexican/Cuban), status (model/girl from a poor neighbourhood), age (older Fabiola/younger Yuliet), and all that these imply in terms of wealth, worldliness, and desirability, is what fuels Yuliet's desire to become like Fabiola, to be her or replace her. The music video is cross cut with shots of the two women addressing the camera, in one of which Yuliet introduces herself as Fabiola,

enacting the female spectator's identification with the star, her identity merging with that of her idol. These are further interspersed with a composite face, made up of photographs of their two faces, an image which both girls have a copy of (figure 1). In *Stars* Richard Dyer notes that 'particularly intense star/audience relationships occur amongst adolescents and women', groups which 'share a peculiarly intense degree of role/identity conflict and pressure, and [...] exclusion from dominant culture',<sup>x</sup> and that 'people's favourite stars tend to be of the same sex as themselves'.<sup>xi</sup> Dyer discusses the degrees of spectator-star identification as ranging from emotional affinity through self-identification, imitation and projection.<sup>xii</sup>

Yuliet is offered a passage from spectator to star, from looker to looked-at, by Benny, who promises her that she will be *seen* on TV when he proposes that she star in the music video alongside Fabiola. Later, when she is given an interview at Fabiola's modelling agency she is asked 'wouldn't you like to be like [Fabiola]?', in an attempt to manipulate her identification. Gledhill notes that 'stars reach their audience primarily through their bodies',<sup>xiii</sup> and in one sequence, we are told, first from Yuliet's perspective, then from Fabiola's, that during a sunbathing session in Cuba, Yuliet was staring at Fabiola's breasts. We are shown photographs which corroborate this, in one of which, Fabiola appears topless with Benny and Yuliet on either side, both looking at her breasts, as if to suggest an equation between male and female spectator, where the object to-be-looked-at is the objectified naked woman, although this objectification of Fabiola is (unsurprisingly) not as simple as it may at first appear, as the model repeatedly emphasizes her own, and the spectator's complicity in this game. The 'dialectical pressure at work between a voyeuristic public that wants to see more and that same public which, in its social function, supports codes and laws that ban any

such revelations'<sup>xiv</sup> is constantly exposed in *¿Quién diablos?* through its staging of titillation and censorship around the sexualized body. As Yuliet narrates her section, her position, lying on a bed, and her nakedness (albeit covered by a sheet) are reminiscent of Fabiola's pose -- as she moves from spectatorship to performance her posture increasingly resembles that of the model whilst the action seems centred around Yuliet's desiring look.

Salma Hayek, who was establishing a Hollywood career when *¿Quién diablos?* was being made, appears in the film as a kind of textbook example of a female Hollywood film star, and her construction as such is exposed in various ways. Yuliet goes to see the film *Midaq Alley* where Hayek stars as Almita, a young woman promised glamour and stardom on the basis of her looks but who becomes a prostitute. A clip from the film in which Almita's patron first promises that he will make her a star, then rapes her, is cross cut with shots of Yuliet giving her opinion on the film and on the actress/character, as well as with shots of Hayek explaining her role in the film. Further interspersed with these are images of Hayek in an evening gown and ostentatious jewellery, arriving at an awards ceremony in a limousine and being photographed upon arrival. Yuliet does not identify with Hayek/Almita, pronouncing her 'stupid'. Her lack of identification with Hayek may be interpreted as a rejection of the star's Hollywoodization/Americanization, whereas Fabiola retains a strong Latin American identity and is closely associated with Mexican culture. Yuliet also seems rather to disdain Almita's aspirations to become a famous actress, accepting it as normal that aspiration to stardom might end in prostitution, stating that 'the girl ended up a whore 'cause they spun her a line and she believed it'. Female acting and modelling are consistently aligned with prostitution in *¿Quién diablos?*, as the female stars make

(tongue in cheek?) references to sex with the director, and the label of prostitute is applied to both Fabiola and Yuliet in the course of the film by other characters, and by each other.

The use of Yuliet's voice describing Almita's aspirations in *Midaq Alley* ('she wanted to be an actress, famous') to accompany the visuals of the real-life Hayek glamorously dressed in the limousine, blur the distinctions between Hayek and the role she plays, between actress and prostitute. In the rape scene we are shown from *Midaq Alley*, the rapist shouts the words 'no tienes nada, ¡nada!' ('you have nothing, nothing!') to Almita. Towards the end of the film, Yuliet has been flown to Mexico to meet the director of a modelling agency, Glenda, who flatters her and tries to ascertain whether she is 'disciplined' enough for modelling. Suddenly Glenda's voice '¿eres disciplinada?' becomes overlaid with the rape clip forcing us to draw a comparison between the two: Glenda's seemingly innocuous words become equated with something far more damaging, violently stripping away Yuliet's subjectivity, and creating a parallel between our heroine and that of *Midaq Alley*.

The comparison between Hayek and Yuliet works both ways: if, as Hayward argues, the constructed star suffers a 'loss of identity', a fragmentation as a result of 'too many mirrors reflecting back the multiple self',<sup>xv</sup> then the representation of Yuliet in the film (doubling, tripling) is analogous to Hayek's fragmented condition of Hollywood star. We see the coherent, constructed image of Hayek at the awards ceremony. The glamour, lights and conspicuous wealth on display contrast sharply with the Havana streets and even those of New Jersey. When Hayek arrives at the awards ceremony, to the cries of 'Salma, Salma' from the photographers, we do not see her through their

lenses, rather Marcovich films her from behind whilst her photo is being taken. We see her facing one way, then another, and Marcovich thus highlights the element of performance, creating a slippage between the perfect, constructed images the photographers will produce, and an 'imperfect' representation. Later, Yuliet's arrival at the airport in Mexico is accompanied by disembodied shouts of 'Salma, Salma', further emphasizing the identifications and desires which Marcovich proposes play in Yuliet's psyche.

The star is 'an impossible object of our desire'<sup>xvi</sup> and combines the exceptional with the ordinary, the ideal with the everyday. Hayek appears 'ordinary' (she is wearing everyday clothes, and is talking to us, therefore accessible) when she speaks directly to the camera about her role as Almita. This shot is filmed with the conspicuous 'HOLLYWOOD' sign on the hills behind her, signalling her star-status, and her lifestyle/surroundings, which Dyer has argued are important in star-construction.<sup>xvii</sup> She appears 'exceptional' or 'ideal' in the awards ceremony sequence described above, and the rapid cross-cutting between these two versions of Hayek further emphasizes this 'curious mixture of accessibility and inaccessibility', an embodiment of the 'contradictory desires' around which cinema is constructed.<sup>xviii</sup> Accessibility is required for identification, but inaccessibility is required to ensure the perpetuation of desire.

Yuliet is a female protagonist whose desires and identifications drive the narrative forward. She is both object, and subject of desire. The film openly sexualizes female (and male) bodies, but does so in such an overt way -- and with such in-built critique -- as to expose the normally naturalized voyeurism of cinema. To do so in this way is tantamount to resistance to the hegemonic sexual politics of the gaze. Moreover, Yuliet

as looker and looked-at moves through multiple positions and comes to symbolize a female spectatorial position irreducible to binary sexuality. In addition to seeing Yuliet as spectator as I have argued, we also see through her eyes, in one particular sequence where she is behind the camera. During most of this sequence she is in fact also in front of it – we see Yuliet using the camera – but for brief moments our gaze is united with hers. Yuliet now has what Doane might call ‘stolen property’: the phallus or camera<sup>xix</sup>. ‘Now *I’m* the director!’ she announces triumphantly (pointing to this particular film’s conflation of the roles of cameraman and director, both performed by Marcovich) questioning and subverting traditional gender positionalities. Her camera is trained in a predatory manner on the groin of a young male,<sup>xx</sup> an aggressive ‘masculine gaze’ also open to the female subject.

### **From Spectatorship to Performance**

So far we have looked at ways in which *¿Quién diablos?* highlights the production of femininity by exposing the mechanisms of identification and desire at work in the female spectator-star relationship. Femininities are ‘performed’ in accordance with these mechanisms. In many ways the film works by foregrounding or exposing its own internal performances: citing narratives and genres, gesturing to obvious scripting, to self-conscious acting, etc. In this section I will further develop my analysis of performance in the film and its particular relationship to themes of submission and resistance which play through the film.

There are manifold instances in the film in which Marcovich is inviting us to notice a performance or deception, in which a performance is performed. For example, self-censorship is frequently made obvious. Characters (Fabiola, her mother, Yuliet, her brother Michel, other residents of San Miguel del Padrón) perform songs for the camera: a young girl at the beginning of the film performs a song and dance in an African language; a little boy performs ‘*Guantanamera*’; Fabiola’s mother sings a Mexican song; Yuliet sings various Cuban songs. We see singers on stage, models on the catwalk, and little girls performing dance routines in the street. Yuliet not only ‘performs’ gender as a reaction to the visual culture of femininity as part of which she is presented to us and which I explored in the last section. The film also concentrates on linguistic performance as a way in which identity is constructed. For example Yuliet states that Cuban women are ‘hot’, which she perhaps sees as legitimizing her sexual interaction with the Italians. In *Orientalism* Said argues that orientalist images of women are of ‘enhanced female types’ such as Cleopatra and Nerval’s *filles du feu*

emphasizing their exotic, suggestive nature.<sup>xxi</sup> Yuliet appears to internalize such exoticizing discourses about Cuban woman as sexual and colonial other and which serve the interests of those who would emphasize the ‘sensual’ rather than the ‘intellectual’ capacities of the colonial subaltern. Interestingly, Yuliet’s father tells us he chose her name because it is Italian. Yuliet herself learns to speak Italian through the Italian tourists she meets on the beaches of Havana, and whose money she accepts for sex. So Yuliet’s father has inscribed her in a system of both mimicking Europe and of prostituting herself to it. Yuliet mimics the discourse of the current regime in Cuba, whilst simultaneously undermining it. Tensions around mimicry and assimilation are pervasive in the film, and nowhere more so than in the field of language. Thus a significant amount of time is given to several characters trying to pronounce the word *actuar* (to act), in which, in Cuba, the final ‘r’ is pronounced as an ‘l’. Normative pronunciation is seen as superior and should be aspired to, whilst the inferior Cuban dialect should be eradicated. The performative aspect of this linguistic assimilation is further accentuated by the choice of word: to *act*, which also contributes to the film’s self-reflexivity, constantly calling attention to the medium. Education as a key tool of linguistic hegemony is emphasized by a little girl’s repetition of the corrective rhyme ‘rápido ruedan los carros...’. In fact the ‘mistaken’ pronunciation, *actual* (current, present), can be seen as privileging the here and now, authenticity over performance. Yuliet’s line ‘aunque no sepa decir actuar, actué’ (‘even if I can’t say ‘to act’, I acted’) demonstrates the irrelevance of mere words when confronted with the vitality of action, privileges practice over theory.

The privileging of subalterity and the exposure of performative practices can be seen as a rebellion of popular culture against the *ciudad letrada*, a strategy of resistance to



hegemonic structures also present in the the correction of 'Juliette' to 'Yuliet' on the screen. The protagonist is literally reinscribing the medium (at her command the letters are punched onto the screen) with the popular, hybridized version of her name. The film's title underlines the fact that 'Juliette' is the wrong name. Juliet as European romantic and cultural icon contrasts with Yuliet as ordinary Cuban teenager. In privileging the Cuban spelling, she claims the name and language for herself and shows irreverence in the face of European culture, a subversive hybridity that 'retains the actual semblance of the authoritative symbol but revalues its presence by resisting it as the signifier of *Entstellung* – after the invention of difference'.<sup>xxii</sup>

## **Resistance**

‘However impeccably the content of an ‘other’ culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is its *location* as the closure of grand theories, the demand that, in analytic terms, it be always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination...’<sup>xxiii</sup>

In this last section I will explore further some of the issues of submission and resistance to which I have alluded in the course of this article, and develop in particular further perspectives on the intersections of postcolonial and transnational discourses with the power relations I have examined thus far. *¿Quién diablos?*, which was filmed between 1995 and 1997, was being made at a time in Cuban history when the relationship of Cuba to external powers was undergoing profound upheaval: the demise of the Soviet Union and accompanying loss of trade and aid led to the Cuban *Período especial en tiempo de paz*, an extended state of economic crisis beginning in 1991. The crisis was exacerbated by the ongoing US embargo against Cuba which was codified into law in 1992. During the ‘Special Period’, the Cuban state began to prioritize international tourism, and in 1993 made it legal for ordinary Cubans to hold dollars, measures which both shifted the relationship of Cuba to the outside world, and introduced internal contradictions to the discourse of Cuban socialism.

Given this context, the fraught relationships between Yuliet, Fabiola and Salma Hayek, which I have thus far suggested can be interpreted on the various levels of the psychoanalytic-sexual and the institutional-cinematic, can be seen on the further level

of Cuba's position within the global shake-up brought about by *Perestroika*, and its ideological and practical implications. The 'loss of identity' which I pointed to earlier can equally well be read as a Cuban anxiety over the contradictions of the 'Special Period', as the state oscillated between introduction of certain capitalist measures and criticism of them as anti-revolutionary. It is no coincidence from this perspective that the film should in some senses be structured around the identifications, similarities and differences between Cuba, Mexico and the US. Indeed, Mexico's own foreign policy in the 1990s -- a loss of interest in its former revolutionary peer, and an increasing interest in globalization and identification with the US model<sup>xxiv</sup> -- would also seem to be reflected upon in the film in Hayek's trajectory to Hollywood, and Yuliet's rejection of her (as I hinted earlier).

Reflecting the new constellation in which Cuba finds itself at the beginning of the 1990s, the film resists the centre/margin binary by using four locations (Cuba, Mexico, New York and New Jersey). It privileges Cuba, making it the centre of the film and thus turning any notion of Cuba as periphery on its head. Yuliet's choice of Cuba over a career abroad reinforces this, and can be read as Cuban resilience at a time when political and economic independence was suddenly imperative. The implication throughout the film (and generally in the international media) is that of a generalized desire in Cuba to 'get out'. Thus Yuliet's father flees to New Jersey, and Don Pepe hangs around on the docks, suitcase in hand. The film's predominant use of beach scenes and seascapes point to what is external to, not inside Cuba, and the opening credits with their visa-style stamps introduce the idea of transit and travel. The beaches become a problematic space; the playground of both tourists and Cubans, yet also signifier of tensions between Cuban citizens and *émigrés*, the internal and the external.

And clearly the plot hinges on the idea of Yuliet's leaving Cuba, on the directorial and spectatorial assumption that this is her desire. So by returning, she thwarts the director's plans, flouts our expectations, and ultimately resists the path that has been neatly laid out for her. Of course, her return may also be interpreted as a resistance to western capitalism, in which she would become involved as a model. The song at the end of the film emphasizes what the régime might see as Cuba's triumph over the West: 'te fuiste/y si te fuiste perdiste/yo, yo me quedé/y ahora soy el rey' ('you left/and in leaving you lost/me, I stayed/and now I'm king'). Perhaps the very complexity of this question is itself part of Yuliet's resistance: she is impossible to pin down, to reduce to a theoretical discourse of 'resistance'.

This same ambivalence can be seen in the film's approach to the issue of (underage) prostitution. Throughout the worsening economic crisis of the 1990s, begging and prostitution became widespread in Havana, largely an attempt by Cubans to access tourist dollars. Pre-revolution, Cuba had been touted as the 'brothel of the Carribean',<sup>xxv</sup> and one of the revolution's aims was to eradicate prostitution. Although Sami Tchak shows that in fact prostitution in Cuba was never completely stamped out, in official discourse it was, and its re-emergence is embarrassing to the régime, which has consistently aligned it with capitalism. On the other hand, however, as Catherine Moses points out, 'to promote tourism, the government has been selling Cuba as a sexual paradise, using photos of scantily clad beautiful women to entice tourists',<sup>xxvi</sup> with the result that in 1995, the Italian magazine *Viaggiare* rated Cuba the number one country in the world for sex tourism.<sup>xxvii</sup> What is more, many of the *jineteras* (a term which may perhaps roughly be translated as 'escort' given that it does not necessarily

imply sexual relations) are underage girls, a fact which the state does not officially acknowledge.

The film devotes a great deal of attention to this question. On the one hand, it could be argued, the film participates unselfconsciously in the commodification of the Cuban body: the cover of the DVD describes Yuliet as ‘spirited, streetsmart and very sexy’, and features ‘sexy’ pictures of her and of Fabiola. There are many other examples in the film of a voyeuristic focus on the female body, as I have described in some detail above, although as I have argued, this is not unproblematic and can also be seen as an exposure of visual culture’s complicity with voyeurism. As with so many instances in the film, an excess of information (Yuliet and Fabiola continually call each other ‘whore’) in fact reveals nothing. Billy, a character who initially tells the viewer that ‘when you don’t understand something, you ask me’, later informs us that sex tourism is acceptable, as long as it is not with minors, before the camera pans down to focus on a little girl, who he wryly introduces as his ‘girlfriend’. Yuliet herself both affirms and denies her own prostitution, in a typically ambivalent discourse, and when responding to the (directorial?) question of how many men she has slept with, states that maybe she has slept with fifty, or seventy, or one hundred, or one thousand. Again, here, the *semblance* of information, which might satisfy a spectatorial desire for (sexual) knowledge is confounded by the excess of information which is of course meaningless. In this way, and with these absurd answers, Yuliet constructs a kind of blank screen which in fact reveals nothing about sexuality, whilst seeming to reveal everything. Such ambivalence around the issue of prostitution is analogous to the Cuban state and society’s own conflictive attitude towards it,<sup>xxviii</sup> but can also be seen as a postcolonial strategy of resistance, a confounding of categories or oppositions ‘that wreaks its

revenge by circulating *without being seen*’, that ‘cuts across the boundaries of master and slave’, that ‘opens up a space *in-between* [...] two locations’.<sup>xxix</sup>

The motif of veiling and unveiling is a constant in the film. The ‘screen’ which Yuliet constructs verbally is enacted visually in the sequence where she describes being raped, narrated by Yuliet and her aunt, Omayra. Typically, the film cuts between the two of them as they narrate the same incident, but also between several different occasions on which Yuliet is describing it. On two of these occasions she is filmed, presumably just after taking a shower, within the shower cubicle. She is wet and there is water dripping on her, and she is partially covered on both occasions by the shower curtain which functions as a kind of veil to which she clings, and with which she continually conceals and reveals her face and upper body (figure 2). The same motif can be seen in the music video where the use of silhouette alternately hides and reveals the contours of the female body. In Mary Ann Doane’s essay ‘Veiling Over Desire’, she theorizes the relationships between (in)visibility, woman and philosophical discourse, arguing that, whilst the veil as a motif has featured in varying philosophical, literary and psychoanalytic discourses, it is in cinema that it becomes ‘most materially a question of what can or cannot be seen’.<sup>xxx</sup> Yuliet is narrating an incident in which she was violently sexually assaulted, but this account is framed by the clichéd and voyeuristic element to her nakedness and location in the shower. What are we to make of this seeming complicity with objectification? Here the veil can be interpreted as a barrier to the scopic drive which underlies cinematic as well as sexual and colonial power; ‘a certain poetics of “invisibility”, “ellipsis”, the evil eye and the missing person – all instances of the “subaltern” in the Derridean sense’.<sup>xxxi</sup> Whilst ‘the question of whether the veil facilitates or blocks vision is ambivalent’,<sup>xxxii</sup> like Yuliet’s screen of numbers,

‘in a curious dialectic of depth and surface [it] reduces all to a surface which is more or less removed’<sup>xxxiii</sup> and which makes the ‘object of knowledge’ unknowable, in fact disrupting and dislocating former categories of knowledge around the sexual or postcolonial subaltern in ‘a strategy of ambivalence in the structure of identification that occurs precisely in the elliptical *in-between*’.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Towards the end of *¿Quién diablos?*, before Yuliet is given the ticket to Mexico, and before the reunion with her father, characters speculate about possible endings for the film, if indeed, as Yuliet jokes, there is anyone left in the audience to see a potential ending. Despite this jokey, ‘anything goes’ approach to its narrative, the film also seems to have a serious message about female spectatorship in that despite her strong identification with Fabiola and desire to become like her, Yuliet ultimately resists the path which has been laid out for her from spectator to star. She is savvy enough to know that in *Midaq Alley*, Almita’s desire to enter the realm of the looked-at ultimately leads to dire consequences for her. However, her own rejection of the modelling job is heavily mediated by the director, and editing and montage are used to frame our interpretation of it as a feminist rejection of objectification. This exemplifies the film’s central question: the contradiction between the director’s obvious, imposed meaning, and the ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ Yuliet who in fact seems to reject the modelling job because it would mean living outside Cuba. Whether Yuliet is ‘authentic’/self-determining or just a pawn for the director’s ideas is the logical question which comes out of this ending, and one to which there is no simple answer.

Marcovich’s complex, original film is complicit with, but also aware of its complicity with, gender and visual hegemony, exposing vital issues like the production of

femininity within visual culture, issues which we might more usually associate with commodity capitalism than a Cuban context. It provides fascinating insights into the vicissitudes of female spectatorship within this context without reaching any single position on it. Its treatment of performance undermines illusionistic cinematic codes and highlights issues of linguistic and sexual subalternity in the aftermath of colonization, at once positing notions of resistance and problematizing them. Like its protagonist, the film is ultimately impossible to inscribe within theoretical discourses of resistance and submission.

Drawing on Bhaba's concept of postcolonial hybridity as uncategorizable, as perturbing discrete categories, Laura Marks proposes that '“hybrid cinema” also implies a hybrid form, mixing documentary, fiction, personal and experimental genres, as well as different media. By pushing the limits of any genre, hybrid cinema forces each genre to explain itself, to forgo any transparent relationship to the reality it represents...', and that 'one cannot help but be implicated in the power relations upon which [hybrid cinema] reflects'.<sup>xxxv</sup> ¿*Quién diablos?*, both aesthetically and thematically, can be seen as inhabiting a third, or hybrid space of undecidability which both hijacks the categories of dominant discourse, and disrupts these binary systems of signification by refusing to confirm or deny them.



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- <sup>i</sup> **¿Quién diablos es Juliette?** Dir. Carlos Marcovich. Mexico: Kino International. 1997.
- <sup>ii</sup> All translations are my own.
- <sup>iii</sup> Early in the film her uncle states that ‘she really needs help’.
- <sup>iv</sup> Santiago Herrera, ‘¿Qué diablos es ficción y qué documental?’, **Kinetoscopio**, 9 (1998), pp.45-47, (p.47).
- <sup>v</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”’, in **Feminism and Film Theory**, ed. by Constance Penley (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.69-79 (p.79).
- <sup>vi</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, **Alice doesn’t: feminism, semiotics, cinema** (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.15.
- <sup>vii</sup> Jackie Stacey, ‘Desperately Seeking Difference’, in **The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality**, ed. by John Caughie and Annette Kuhn (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.244-57.
- <sup>viii</sup> Mary Ann Doane, **Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis** (London: Routledge, 1991), p.14.
- <sup>ix</sup> **El callejón de los milagros**. Dir. Jorge Fons. Mexico: Alameda. 1995.
- <sup>x</sup> Richard Dyer, **Stars** (London: British Film Institute, 1998), p.32.
- <sup>xi</sup> Dyer, p.17.
- <sup>xii</sup> Dyer, p.18.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Christine Gledhill, in Susan Hayward, **Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts** (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 351.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Thomas Hess, in Dyer, p.51.
- <sup>xv</sup> Hayward, p.353.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Hayward, p.355.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Dyer, p.38.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Judith Mayne, **Cinema and Spectatorship** (London: Routledge, 1998), p.126.
- <sup>xix</sup> Doane, p.34
- <sup>xx</sup> Earlier on in the film, when Yuliet describes being raped, it is implied but never confirmed that this is the same man who raped her.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Edward Said, **Orientalism: western conceptions of the orient** (London: Penguin, 1995), p.180.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Homi K. Bhaba, **The Location of Culture** (London: Routledge, 1994), p.115.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Bhaba, p.31.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Georgina Sánchez, ‘Mexican-Cuban Relations’, in **Redefining Cuban Foreign Policy: The Impact of the “Special Period”**, ed. by H. Michael Erisman and John M. Kirk (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), pp. 260-279 (pp.270-271).
- <sup>xxv</sup> Sami Tchak, **La Prostitution à Cuba** (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999), p.13.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Catherine Moses, **Real Life in Castro’s Cuba** (Wilmington: SR Books, 1999), p.48.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Moses, p.48.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Tchak notes that the *jinetera* is no longer seen by everyone as a traitor of the ideals of the revolution. On the contrary she may see herself or be seen as symbol of the Cuban who struggles, or *luchadora*, p.29.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Bhaba, p.55.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Doane, p.46.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Bhaba, p.59.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Doane, p.49.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Doane, p.56.

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> Bhaba, p.60.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Laura U. Marks **The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses**, (London: Duke University Press, 2000), p.8.